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End States vs. Strategies

Vegetius

I don't know who came up with the term "exit strategy", but if he (or she) is still alive he should be taken out and shot. An exit is not a strategy; it is a retreat. There is nothing wrong with cutting losses and running if the situation dictates, but let's call it what it is. However, let's also make sure that the war is lost before we resort to that. In Iraq and Afghanistan we have stated exit strategies, but no clear stated vision of what we want either nation to look like when we are done.

If getting out of these two wars is our only objective, we need to fire the entire national security apparatus and replace its personnel with divorce lawyers; they are the true exit strategists.

The great strategists in history have always had clear end states of what they had in mind for the strategic landscape that they were dealing with and knew how to match those ends to available means. Perhaps the greatest practitioner of this approach in modern times was Otto Von Bismarck. The Iron Chancellor had a clear vision of a greater Germany united under Prussian leadership. He moved carefully to make this happen with three limited objective wars in which he diplomatically outmaneuvered his opponents, isolating his intended victims from military and political outside support. In doing so, he always ensured that the Prussian military did not stray outside his intended use for armed force in achieving the desired end state.

Our strategic situation is obviously different. Today, we are engaged in a war against radical Islamic expansionism rather than the kind of voluntary wars of dynastic expansion that Bismarck engineered. Our situation is more similar to that of the Byzantine Empire, and we have the same enemy, albeit in a new incarnation; that being expansionist radical Islamic Jihad. The Byzantine grand strategy of containing radical Jihadist Islam succeeded for approximately seven centuries. The Eastern Roman Empire had a comprehensible strategic framework for dealing with this Jihadist threat. Thus far, we do not.

Iraq and Afghanistan are wars of containment against radical expansionist Islam. There may or may not have been Jihadists in Iraq when we got started, but there are now; that is a fact that we have to deal with. What we lack is a clear vision for what we want these nations to look like in the long run after Americans are no longer in the lead in the containment battle. Lacking a clear vision of end state, we are left with an exit non- strategy.

As Edward Luttwak points out in *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, the philosophy of Jihad is one of continuous conflict; truces are allowed, and some have lasted for centuries, but this is a forever war. Consequently, we should have a strategic framework, not just for the wars we have, but for dealing with the conflicts to come. With such a framework, we would be better

prepared to catch Jihadist outbreaks while they are still smoldering rather than waiting for them to become conflagrations such as Iraq or Afghanistan. What we call wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Philippines, and elsewhere on the Muslim periphery are merely campaigns in this never ending war of containment.

Below are four suggested precepts for the strategic end state for each campaign in this long war of containment in nations infected by radical Islam:

The nation must be able to have the capability to deny radical Jihadists sanctuary within its borders with reasonable support from U.S. or other coalition forces. The Philippines are an example of something we are doing right. The radical Muslim insurgency in the southern third of the archipelago has been festering for a century. It became truly alarming to the United States when it threatened to become a sanctuary for several expansionist Al Qaeda franchise groups. The Philippine armed forces are being assisted by American advisors as well as some other special operations assistance. It is a good example of what the containment strategy should be. There is no need for an American lead, and there probably never will be such a need. Thus, there is no proposed exit strategy. We have been largely successful in this containment effort since Philippine independence and will likely do it indefinitely with a minimum drain on forces and American national treasure. This is reasonable support; if we can get to this state in Iraq and Afghanistan, we will have done very well indeed.

Obtaining a clear break between the Taliban and Al Qaeda would go a long way toward achieving this goal in Afghanistan. The Taliban are not by nature expansionist Jihadists. Our problem with them has been that they provided Al Qaeda with sanctuary. Unfortunately, at this time, the Taliban have no reason to consider such an agreement; they have the momentum.

The nation's government must not be viewed as an enemy by the majority of the population or by a significant minority that could turn to Jihadists for protection. This objective is nuanced to reflect reality. Governance in the Muslim world has been historically abysmal, even in the best of times. Ironically, the pre-Saddam Baath government gets good grades by the standards of the Gulf Region. In the areas of providing infrastructure and government services, it did a pretty good job. Getting back to that level of paternal government involvement would be a win.

Conversely, the best the Afghans have historically expected from their government is that it would leave them alone and not force them into overt resistance. Getting both nations back to those levels of lowered expectations would be a major success in our two ongoing conflicts. Let's keep our expectations reasonable.

Our governance advisors in both nations are doing great work both at the national and provincial levels, but they are battling centuries of endemic corruption. Today, Iraq is at a tipping point. One advisor of my acquaintance described governance there as being in a state of "enlightened incompetence"; the good news is that this is better than Al Qaeda in Iraq or the various Shiite insurgent groups can offer. All bets are off if the Maliki government is stupid enough to crack down on the Sunnis before the coming election. This would begin to give Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and its fringe allies a chance for a revival.

Afghanistan is a much more difficult case. The Taliban offer some sense of justice, however rough, as compared with government courts which are slow and corrupt at best. Taliban policing is vicious but relatively fair and efficient; government police are viewed as incompetent at best and predatory at worst. Until we get to a point where the government is viewed by the population as less harmful than the Taliban, Afghanistan will remain a basket case. This is a minimalist approach, but it may be the best we can do with the human resources available.

The nation should be aspiring to representative government that recognizes basic human rights. Aspiring is a key word here. In the Cold War, we aligned ourselves with some odious governments that professed to anti-communism. To some extent, we have paid the price for that in Pakistan and Indonesia where they are still digging out from the ruins of Cold War governance. Even in nations that profess to employ relatively enlightened authoritarian governance such as Kuwait and Syria are prone to the fact that, as John Lehman once wrote, “Power corrupts, but absolute power is really neat”. Eventually, a truly abysmal leader will arise absent a legitimate succession mechanism.

The possibility of a population being able to peacefully change its government is a strong mitigation to violent change advocated by radical Islamists. People will put up with a lot in the present if they see the possibility of participating in real change in the future. This is exactly what Egypt and Saudi Arabia are struggling with today and why both have been incubators for Islamic militancy; change is glacial, and many young people take out their frustrations overseas. An imperfect government today that has the potential for change is infinitely preferable to a bad one that promises more of the same.

The nation and the United States have a security agreement that ensures its protection from attack by neighboring states. This author is appalled by the fact that beyond exit time lines, there appears to be no long-term plan for ensuring the territorial integrity of Iraq or Afghanistan against predatory neighbors. Contrast this with the wars that we have won, or at least tied, in the past seventy years. We are still providing strong security guarantees and some American military presence to the nations that we liberated or defeated in World War II (France is the exception that proves the rule), South Korea, and Kuwait. Counterinsurgency warfare enervates a nation. We created a South Vietnamese military that could defeat internal insurgency, but ultimately left it naked to conventional invasion by the North Vietnamese. Ironically, this appears to be the place where exit strategy, vice end state, became the ultimate strategic goal.

Most Iraqis that I know (Shiia, Sunni and Kurd) are terribly concerned about our lack of a clearly stated intention to provide security agreements against Iran. Senator Jim Webb has been largely a lone voice concerning Iranian influence in Iraq. It does not profit us to protect a nation from the enemy within only to leave it vulnerable to the barbarians at the gates. Afghans will always be worried about Russia and Iran. They have good reason to have felt abandoned by the United States in the past and appear to have good reason to be worried for the future given our sense of strategic ambivalence.

A Strategic Vacuum. The suggestions above are meant to spur debate; there are probably better ideas out there, but those presented above are far more coherent than any that this author has seen come out of our national security structure to date. If our only goal in getting involved in a conflict on the soil of another nation is to get out, one has to wonder if we should be there in the first place. Like nature, the strategic landscape abhors a vacuum. One thing is sure in the world -- if you do not have a strategy, someone else does.

The author is a government employee and a former infantryman.

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